

Climate top of mind as students vote; Special advance polls open at post-secondary campuses across country

The Toronto Star
October 6, 2019 Sunday

Copyright 2019 Toronto Star Newspapers Limited

Section: NEWS; Pg. A3

Length: 1157 words

Byline: Taryn Grant Star Halifax Rosa Saba Star Calgary Kenyon Wallace Toronto Star Jesse Winter Star Vancouver

Body

When 20-year-old Halifax psychology student Samantha Pratt slipped her twice-sealed envelope into a ballot box on Canada's east coast Saturday morning, she may well have been one of the first Canadians to do so in this month's federal election.

"I think it's really important for our age group to make an impact," Pratt said.

This year, with so many millennials and other young people taking to the streets in recent weeks to demand action on climate change, Star reporters fanned out across the country to see what was motivating early voters, and whether climate action was being carried to the ballot box.

Pratt, an Ontarian studying in the university-dense maritime city, cast her ballot as part of a new special program aimed at allowing university students across the country to easily vote in their home ridings even if they're studying elsewhere. While regular advance polls don't open until Oct. 11, students, faculty and staff on select campuses across the country got the chance to have their say starting Saturday.

Pratt said her vote was primarily decided by three issues: climate action, political commitment to engaging with youth, and support for higher education.

Climate was top of mind for every student voter who spoke to Star Halifax on the first day of on-campus voting.

Connor Zinck-Marier, a 19-year-old from Bridgewater, N.S., said he was sure politicians would be galvanized into more expedient climate action if everyone in his generation took to the polls.

"There would be a big change with that. I think (climate) would be one of the biggest issues that would be dealt with right away."

Zinck-Marier, who's in his second year of a science degree, said no federal party had a climate action plan "down pat, right now," but he hoped they would get there soon.

"As of now, I think we're only living until 2050, or something like that. I'd like to live longer than that."

In Toronto, universities and colleges across the city opened their doors to give students, faculty and staff an opportunity to cast their ballots early.

At the University of Toronto, the Reading Room at Hart House was transformed into a polling station that saw a steady stream, though not a torrent, of voters Saturday afternoon.

Climate top of mind as students vote; Special advance polls open at post-secondary campuses across country

"This might sound very intuitive, but these people are making decisions that are going to impact me, not just in minor ways, but things that will affect my livelihood," said Nicole Tse, a fourth-year music student, after casting her ballot. "So it's more of a question of why I wouldn't go out and vote."

Armin Vallazza, a first-year graduate student in pharmacology, said that part of the reason he thinks young people do not vote in the same numbers as older demographics is that there is a "belief that your vote is not enough to do anything."

"But as we saw with the last presidential election in the U.S., it does matter," said Vallazza, 22, after casting his vote at Hart House. "It's absolutely crucial you go and vote."

Across town at Ryerson University, fifth-year film production student, Hollie Olenik, 22, said she is voting because "I feel I can't afford not to."

"We are in such a turning point right now in politics. People in my demographic especially need to come out because our futures are precarious," said Olenik, noting the difficulties young people are facing today, particularly around full-time employment and climate change.

The polling stations at Ryerson and George Brown College are also offering Indigenous elder and youth interpreters.

The role of the interpreters includes helping Indigenous students become familiar with the voting process, translating instructions from English to Indigenous languages and working with individuals who may not have identification, said Christine Luza, an interpreter in the Elder/Youth Program with Elections Canada, who was on hand at Ryerson Saturday afternoon.

She said many Indigenous people voting during this election may be voting for the first time because of Canada's recent steps toward reconciliation.

"It's very important as a gesture of the society to have this position," said Luza, a member of M'Chigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin Island. "It means that the Canadian government thought about including me as a voter and it means I also can think of myself as part of Canada, where maybe that may not have always been possible before truth and reconciliation."

She noted that if there had been more Indigenous people at the polls in the role she now occupies, "I would have voted many more times in my life. It really makes a difference."

Students in Calgary were divided when it came to the top issue driving their vote. Some said climate change was the only issue they cared about, while others said they were casting their vote in support of the Alberta oil and gas industry.

Third-year engineering student Seth Milner said the Alberta economy was top of mind for him, adding he feels it's important to get oil to the global market.

"It's a difficult situation, because you get a lot of opposition from other areas in Canada," he said.

First-year engineering student Lukas Cobbler said climate change was the No. 1 issue for him.

"For me, everything else kind of takes a back seat. If we don't take care of that, any of the other problems are kind of secondary," he said.

Paul Kershaw, a professor at the University of British Columbia and the founder of Generation Squeeze, agreed that Election 2019 will likely have historically high youth voter turnout, and not only because of climate change.

"We have to realize the younger demographic is increasingly frustrated by big issues," he said. "Finding affordable places to rent, this challenge of just making a home, is one that has changed the whole ball game."

Climate top of mind as students vote; Special advance polls open at post-secondary campuses across country

The 2015 federal election saw huge gains in youth voter turnout, climbing to roughly 57 per cent from around only 39 per cent in the 2011 federal election. Kershaw expects that trend to continue this year. "We can expect young people to turn out at rates over 65 per cent."

On Kershaw's own campus, climate change was the most commonly cited concern among the students who spoke to Star Vancouver. Twenty-year-old Shovon Das, a biotechnology student from Calgary, said his biggest worry was having a government that could manage the transition away from an oil-based economy without sacrificing jobs and the heart of Canada's economy along the way.

"A lot of people are saying how climate change is difficult, how it's bad, but they're not saying where the new jobs are going to come from," he said.

Twenty-one-year-old Siobhan McLaren emerged from the polling station wearing a wide smile. She marched in this month's massive climate strike marches in Vancouver, which saw about 100,000 people take to the streets. It goes without saying that the climate emergency is her biggest concern.

"It was amazing. Montreal had almost 500,000 people. It's the most hopeful thing that's happened in a long time," McLaren said.

With files from Cherise Seucharan

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: BALLOTS (90%); CLIMATE ACTION (90%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (90%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (89%); EARLY VOTING (89%); ELECTIONS & POLITICS (89%); POLLING SITES (89%); COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES (88%); CERTIFICATES, DEGREES & DIPLOMAS (78%); ELECTIONS (78%); IN-PERSON VOTING (78%); PSYCHOLOGY (78%); CLIMATE CHANGE (77%); CLIMATOLOGY (77%); COLLEGE STUDENTS (77%); EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION EMPLOYEES (77%); ELECTORAL DISTRICTS (73%); DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS (72%); GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (72%); PHARMACOLOGY (69%); MUSIC EDUCATION (65%)

Industry: COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES (88%); EDUCATIONAL SERVICES (78%); PSYCHOLOGY (78%); COLLEGE STUDENTS (77%); PHARMACOLOGY (69%)

Geographic: TORONTO, ON, CANADA (92%); HALIFAX, NS, CANADA (88%); ONTARIO, CANADA (88%); NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA (78%); CANADA (93%)

Load-Date: October 6, 2019